

## Token for Your Thoughts by chunkbuellder

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**Summary:**

A look into the lives of the teenage Losers Club where Beverly has found her punk rock calling, Ben is still head over heels, and Stanley just wants his friends to understand him. Bill and Mike are heartbroken, but at least they found a friend in each other. That just leaves Eddie, who's finally hit his rebellious stage with a day full of detention, first drinks, and stolen bikes; and Richie, whose mind is filled with nothing but classic rock and secrets. Oh, and plenty of jokes about Eddie's mom.

## Token for Your Thoughts

### Author's Note:

Thank you so much for checking out my work! I'd love to hear what you think in the comments :)

Throughout his nearly-twelve years in the Derry public school system, Eddie Kaspbrak had never had a detention. That being said, he was not a star student, not even close. His attendance record was plagued with sick days when his mom didn't see him fit for class, and he had the grades to show it. No matter how often Bill brought him his homework, Eddie was doomed at the C average with a lucky B every once in a while. And he was perfectly okay with that.

Detention was just a classroom, Eddie would discover on what currently seemed like the second-worst day of his life. He walked through the door solemnly, shoulders hunched as he approached the desk of Mrs. Shirley, his sophomore English teacher who he'd often visit during his lunch hour just to talk to someone who wouldn't have a smart-ass reply to everything he had to say. Richie used to call Mrs. Shirley Eddie's 'girlfriend', and Eddie would just about die if she was ever in their vicinity to hear that.

"Eddie, what are you doing here?" Mrs. Shirley asked in her calm and sweet, yet concerned voice. It had been a year since Eddie was last in this classroom, but he'd still smile at her and stop for a quick chat in the hall between classes. She always asked how his mom was doing. He asked about her husband and their dog.

"Could you just sign my pink slip, please?" Eddie asked, trying to force a smile on the corner of his mouth. Today wasn't a day for pleasantries and not even his favourite teacher could turn that around.

"Is everything alright?" she asked as she took the slip from him and searched for a black ink pen from the cup on her desk.

"I'm okay, Mrs. Shirley. Just a rough day," Eddie said.

Mrs. Shirley gave him a tight-lipped smile and she handed the slip back. "Sit anywhere you like. You'll be dismissed at four o'clock."

Eddie folded up his slip and tucked it into the front pocket of the shoulder bag he replaced his fanny pack with last year. No, it wasn't because Richie's jokes finally got to him, although he would admit that his stupid face sometimes made him seethe. A shoulder bag was just more practical. Besides, Richie once told him it made him look cool.

Stanley Uris was sitting in the far back corner with his textbook open and a notebook half-hanging off his desk. Typically, you weren't supposed to do homework in detention, but Mrs. Shirley didn't see the point in that.

"I don't want to talk to you," Stanley mumbled without looking up from his page.

"We're not supposed to talk, anyway," Eddie said as he carefully hung the strap of his bag on his chair.

Stan gripped his pen tighter. "Don't act like it's not your fault we're here."

"My fault? It was your note that Mr. Simons confiscated. You couldn't even draw a proper dick. It looked like a hot dog bun with two eyes."

Just as he said it, Ben walked into the classroom next. He placed his pink slip on Mrs. Shirley's desk and got a similar questioning to the one Eddie did. Stan and Eddie were both watching him, and Ben made eye contact long enough to shake his head at them. He picked a seat at the front of the class, as far away from them as he could.

"We should probably apologize to Ben, at least," Eddie sighed.

"We?" Stanley scoffed.

Eddie snapped his head back to him, nose crinkled in anger. He had to make sure to keep his voice down to a whispered yell. "Listen, asshole—"

"Boys!" Mrs. Shirley called out from the front of the room. There was

no fooling her bat ears.

“Sorry,” Stan and Eddie groaned at the same time.

She eyed them a moment more, giving them a nonverbal warning, and then addressed the room. “Detention starts now. You’re to be silent for the next hour. I’ll let you know when you can leave.”

Stanley had already gone back to his homework. Eddie supposed he could get his done as well. It’s not like he could just sit here and dwell on how terrible his day was going—how terrible his life was going, actually—but he probably would.

Four o’clock couldn’t come fast enough. Mrs. Shirley must’ve been feeling anxious to get out of there as well since she let them go at ten-to. Stanley shoved his books into his backpack and made a beeline for the door, not even stopping to look at Eddie. Not that Eddie was too interested in walking with him, either.

As Eddie neared the front, he tried to ignore Mrs. Shirley’s stare and, in the process, ran directly into Ben in the doorway.

“Sorry,” Ben mumbled before Eddie realized it was him.

When they reached the outside of the class, Eddie stopped him near the lockers. “Look, man, I’m sorry you got in trouble because of me and Stan.”

Ben pulled his bag higher on his shoulder, staring at him in annoyance. “I’m never passing notes for you again.”

“That’s fine,” Eddie said. “And I’ll never be passing a note to Stan again, I can promise you that. That guy just gets on my nerves. You know it was *his* note that got us caught? And he had the opacity to claim that it was my fault.”

“Do you even know what ‘opacity’ means?”

Eddie spun around to see Beverly approaching them with a large poster board under her arm and Richie in her wake.

"Of course I know what opacity means," Eddie said, his snappy tone making Beverly crack a smile. She withheld from correcting him.

"So you've finally done time, huh Eds?" Richie was sipping on a Coke he must've bought from the vending machine.

Eddie pulled his pink slip from his pocket and waved it in the air. "Yeah, I just need another twenty of these to catch up to you, right?"

"Are we still talking detentions or did you and Mrs. Shirley get freaky in there?" Richie put his hands behind his head and made a circular motion with his hips.

Eddie rolled his eyes. "You're so disgusting, you know that, Richie?"

"What are you guys still doing here?" Ben asked, his gaze naturally falling to Bev.

"Oh, you know," Bev popped her gum and threw an arm around Richie's shoulders, "just teaching Richie, here, how to make out properly."

Ben raised his eyebrows, forcing them to fall just as quickly. This was an ongoing bit between Bev and Richie that Ben was never a big fan of. When they were fourteen, Beverly had asked Richie on a date to the movies. She once told Ben that it was because he never looked at her like the others did, plus she thought he was kind of cute. It didn't take long for them to realize they didn't have the chemistry that would warrant a second date, but they had been faking the tension between them for show ever since.

"You should give Eddie some lessons, next," Richie said, crossing his arm over Beverly's just to play along. "He's never had any practice."

"I've kissed plenty of girls, for your information."

"Your mom doesn't count."

"We got paired up for a history project," Bev explained to end the bickering. She side-stepped away from Richie so his hand would fall, then held up the poster board they had just spent the last hour gluing newspaper clippings from the upcoming election onto in the library.

“Oh man, Bill Clinton is so cool,” Ben gushed. “Did you see him on MTV last week?”

“Sure did, new kid. If I could vote this year, I’d be checking his name off on my ballot.”

“If you nerds are done talking crushes, Bill and Mike are waiting for us at the arcade. Are you two coming or what?” Richie asked Ben and Eddie.

“What about Stan?” Eddie said.

Richie nodded forward just as Eddie felt someone hit their shoulder roughly against the back of his. “I’m coming too,” Stanley said, continuing towards the front doors without looking back. He wasn’t letting his bitterness fade so easily.

“Guess he’s coming too,” Bev said, turning to follow. She’d have to make a quick pit stop at Mr. Simons’s room to drop off her poster board, and then they were all finally free for the weekend. Ben rushed to catch up to her.

Richie turned to look at Eddie who was still planted in the same spot, not even a foot from Mrs. Shirley’s doorway. “Waiting for your girlfriend to join us?”

“Shut up, Richie.”

Richie softened, standing a little straighter. “Is Stan still mad at you?”

“He’s being ridiculous,” Eddie said. “How many times do I need to apologize to him? It was a stupid reason to get detention, anyway. I don’t know why he was so mad about it. All he did the whole time was sit there and grumble. He’s sending me on a fucking guilt trip is what he’s doing.”

“*Did* you apologize, though?”

“Do you listen to anything I say? *God* .” Eddie stormed off without another word.

“Cool, I guess I’ll go fuck myself,” Richie called after him.

With one gulp, Richie finished the rest of his Coke and jogged to catch up with the others. He tried to toss the can into a bin across the hall, but it ended up bouncing off the side. And he wondered why he was in the AV Club instead of the basketball team even though he was one of the tallest guys in junior year.

Even though all of the Losers were old enough to drive, Mike was the only one who actually had enough money saved up to buy a car. Bill technically had a car, but it had been sitting in his parents' driveway ever since it stalled on him on his way home from school four months ago. The engine was yet to start up again, but it made a great tinker toy.

Since Mike had taken Bill with him when he first left school this afternoon, that left the rest of them with just their bikes and their feet to get around. Today, Richie and Stan had biked to school together while the others had found their own way on foot. So Eddie, Ben, and Beverly walked leisurely along the side of the road to the arcade, Richie pushing his bike with his feet next to them and Stan pedaling at a slow pace up ahead, not quite in earshot.

"All I'm saying is that if we already had tickets there's no way they could deny us entry," Beverly said as she walked next to Ben, their arms brushing together every time they swung. She had a cigarette between her fingers and kept making sure she blew the smoke away from Ben. Behind them, Richie was making circles around Eddie.

"Just get on, Eds. We'll get there so much faster."

"You're crazy if you ever think I'm getting on the back of that fucking thing with you."

Ben thought over Beverly's preposition again. She heard that Nirvana was supposed to be playing a show in Boston next month and had got it in her head that Ben would be willing to skip school to take a little road trip via coach bus. Not to mention it was an eighteen-plus show and the two of them were only on the brink of seventeen.

"It's twenty bucks the morning of the show. They're not selling any

before that day so we have to get in line early,” Beverly told him firmly.

Ben tilted his head with one eye closed. He wouldn’t exactly call himself a Nirvana fan, but the last he heard, they weren’t on any sort of tour right now. “Where did you hear about this concert, again?”

“If you crash into me, I swear to God, Richie!” Eddie’s voice had gotten shrill. Stan glanced over his shoulder just to see what he was going on, then rolled his eyes.

Richie skidded his tires in front of Eddie, who jumped backward at the sound alone. He stopped and closed his eyes, taking in a sharp breath as he tried to control his rage. Richie let out a cackle.

“Fuck you, man.”

“The sooner we get there the sooner I can kick your ass at *Space Invaders*,” Richie said.

Eddie kept walking, refusing to look in his direction. “You’re not even good at *Space Invaders* .”

“That’s not what your mom said last night.”

The thought crossed Eddie’s mind to shove Richie off his bike so he’d land flat in his ass, but he knew he’d never do it. He didn’t want to hurt Richie, he just really wished he’d shut his trashmouth every once in a while.

“What do you say, new kid? We’ll make a weekend trip out of it.” Bev smiled sweetly as she dropped the filter of her cigarette to the ground, scraping across the pavement with her shoe to put it out.

“Yeah, that’d be fun,” Ben agreed. He never could say no to her. Sometimes he worried if he’d be cursed with this crush for the rest of his life. The yearbook page in his wallet made him think so.

Stanley had turned his bike around, slowly peddling back towards them. The low-setting sun had him backlit. “You guys want to pick up the pace?” he said.



“What’s up your butt, Stan?” Richie asked.

“Nothing. We just said we’d be there like twenty minutes ago, that’s all,” he told them, then started to bike ahead before he got a reply. The rest of them stilled, watching him leave.

“Is this your doing?” Richie asked Eddie, pointing an accusatory finger at Stanley.

“Shut up, Richie,” Eddie grumbled. He was really not in the mood today.

As much as he didn’t want to brag, Mike was well-aware that he had the top spot on the *Street Fighter* high score list. It actually didn’t even take that long for him to beat the former high score, but now that he had it, he didn’t want to let it go so easily. That wasn’t going to stop Bill from trying to beat him every chance he got.

“Another round, Denbrough?” he asked smugly, seeing the word ‘Winner!’ flash across his side of the screen.

“My turn!” said an all-too-familiar voice approaching them. Richie squeezed his way in between Mike and Bill, taking over for Bill who gave up his spot first.

“I thought you said you wanted to play *Space Invaders*,” Eddie said, appearing on Mike’s side. Once those two showed up, Mike knew better than to try arguing in any way.

“I’d rather play with your mom,” Richie said, completely ignoring Mike and Bill as they slowly walked away.

“We need tokens to play the game, idiot,” Eddie said, turning towards the machine on the other side of the room.

“Oh, thanks. I needed to stock up.” Richie reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of tokens, plucking one from his palm and sliding it in.

When he heard the game starting up, Eddie turned around in a panic.

“What are you doing?” he said.

“Getting a head start, apparently.”

Beverly and Ben watched on from behind them, looking slightly amused. Bill and Mike gave them half-assed waves, still recovering from the usual burst of energy Richie and Eddie brought into a room. It was never wanted.

“You’re such a fucking cheater, Richie!” Eddie ran back to the game before Richie could beat him in an unfair fight.

“Your mom’s a cheater.”

“That doesn’t even make any sense!”

Pushed to the side, the rest of the losers exchanged knowing, annoyed, glances. Except for Ben, who was eyeing the Ms. Pacman machine he and Beverly would often take turns on. Her focused face was fun to watch, the way she bit her tongue between her teeth just before she was about to win. Before he got lost in heart eyes and “I Want to Know What Love Is” by Foreigner started playing in his head, he shook off the thought.

“You g-g-guys wanna go s-s-see *Encino Man* ?” Bill asked the group, pointing a thumb at the poster behind them.

“Ow, stop it!” Eddie shouted. Richie was using his foot to hook around Eddie’s leg, trying to pull him off balance. In retaliation, Eddie reached to grab Richie’s glasses off his face, his eyes still focused on the screen. Richie had to lean away so he couldn’t reach them.

“Yes,” they all said at the same time.

Stanley, the most eager for a little peace, led the way to the theatre. They stopped at the concession for popcorn and sodas, Mike buying a pack of Twizzlers that he wasn’t planning on sharing. While they settled into their seats in the back row, Riche and Eddie were still back in the arcade, complete oblivious to the fact that they had been left alone.

“Ha!” Richie threw his fists in the air once Eddie’s character was finally dead. “That’s five bucks, Eds.”

“What? We never made a bet! I don’t owe you anything.”

“It’s the price for having the honour of going against the top *Street Fighter* player in Derry.”

“Nuh-uh, Mike beat your score two days ago.”

“What the fuck?!” Richie whipped his head around to look at the screen. He scanned the list from bottom to top, seeing his own initials in the spot just before Mike’s. “Shit, Mikey, when did you get so good at—”

He and Eddie both turned around to see their friends had disappeared completely. They stretched their necks, surveying the room before Richie huffed.

“Those assholes ditched us!” Eddie exclaimed.

“They probably just went to the movies. Bill wouldn’t shut up about *Encino Man* all day.”

Richie led them to the box office so they could get a couple of tickets for themselves. He took a ten-dollar bill from his wallet and placed it on the counter, holding two fingers up for the cashier.

Eddie followed, looking confused. “Encino? Like a man on fire?”

“That’s *inferno*, Einstein.” Richie took the two tickets from the cashier, handing one to Eddie.

“Then what does— What’s this?”

It took a second for Eddie to realize what Richie gave him. He looked down at his hand then up to Richie again.

“What’s what?”

“Why’d you buy my ticket?”

Richie opened his mouth to reply, then closed it again. The look on Eddie's face, head tilted and brow furrowed together, was making a lump form in his throat. He tried to swallow it down.

"Because you're buying me popcorn," he managed to get out. "Thought I'd be generous instead of you owing me five bucks."

"I don't owe you five bucks!"

"Extra butter, please," Richie grinned, his teeth on display.

Eddie groaned, stopping himself from stomping his foot. He had to remember that he was sixteen, sometimes, even though Richie seemed to bring out the twelve-year-old brain inside of him. "If you want anything else, I only have enough cash for a large popcorn," he said.

Richie shrugged. "I don't mind sharing."

"Fine, but I'm not sharing a drink with you," Eddie declared as they got in line for the concession.

"I didn't want the crabs you got from your mom, anyway."

"You can't get crabs from a straw, dumbass."

"Tell me, then, how'd your mom give them to you?"

It wasn't hard to find the rest of the Losers in the theatre. They were the ones in the back row making the most noise. Everyone around them had either moved seats or known not to sit too close. Bev had her feet up on the chair in front of her, chomping on handfuls of popcorn as slouched low in her seat. On either side of her were Mike and Ben, and Bill and Stanley were near the opposite aisle. Richie took the seat next to Mike, so Eddie sat next to him on the very end. From a few seats down, Stanley leaned over, long enough to see Eddie sit, but not enough to look like he cared. Eddie noticed.

"Mike, I hate to be this guy," Richie whispered even though he was being loud enough for them all to hear, "but you're being a major

cockblock right now.” He nodded toward Beverly, who just shook her head with a laugh.

Eddie eyed them down the aisle, chewing slowly on a single kernel of popcorn.

“Buh-beep buh-beep, Richie,” Bill said from the other side of her.

“C’mon, he took my high score and now he wants to take my girl?”

Beverly stretched her arm behind Mike so she could flick Richie in the ear. Mike let out a deep sigh and looked at Bill. “Switch seats with me?” he asked.

Bill snorted. “Not a ch-chance.”

Eddie was still staring at Richie, waiting for him to bring his attention back. “Why do you always do that?” he said.

Richie turned to him. “Do what?”

“Act all flirty with Beverly and pretend you’re into her.” Eddie kept his voice down. “Everyone knows you’re not, so why do you do it? It’s— It’s just dumb.”

“We’re just joking around, Eds.” Richie tried to reason.

Eddie let his eyes wander toward Ben and Bev a few seats down. Ben kept glancing at her hand on the armrest between them. When she noticed, his eyes quickly averted to the screen.

“How do you think Ben feels? He probably doesn’t want to see you hitting on the girl he likes all the time.” Eddie whispered for real this time. Everyone and their mother knew Ben had a crush on Bev. At this point, whenever he got the balls to ask her out was just a waiting game. Richie really didn’t understand why Ben kept refusing his help.

“Ben can take a joke. I’m sure Bev would rather eat a worm than kiss me.”

“Yeah? Is that what she said?” Eddie grumbled sarcastically.

“Damn, why’s everyone so moody today? Should’ve spiked your Coke.”

Eddie’s eyes grew wide. “What?!”

“Will you two shut up?!” Mike burst. He wasn’t sure how much more bickering he could take. Bill had the right idea when he said they shouldn’t wait for the others before they got their seats.

They watched the movie in silence after that. From the corner of his eye, Eddie could see the reflection of the movie in Richie’s glasses. It was so distracting that not stealing a glance was practically impossible. The bucket of popcorn was in Richie’s lap, slightly closer to Eddie because they were sharing, after all. Eddie made sure to time his handfuls of the buttery snack, just to be safe. He didn’t need any more awkward interactions with Richie that he couldn’t talk his way out of.

After the movie, Richie voiced his determination to beat Mike’s score on *Street Fighter*. Not only did he want to be the top player, but he also wanted to win *against* Mike. A one-on-one showdown for the title. Mike was less enthused about the idea. He didn’t care about his score nearly as much as Richie did, and definitely not enough to miss out on Bill’s suggestion that they all go out for pizza. It was nearly six-thirty, anyway, the perfect time to split a pie.

Fitting seven people into Mike’s car had become a competitive sport, at this point. Mike always had the driver’s seat meaning he never had to battle it out for legroom or whether or not he’d have to suffer the whole drive with an elbow digging into his ribs. Bev used to claim her passenger seat privilege since she was the only girl, but that only worked in Bill’s car. Mike went by shotgun rules, and somehow Richie was the only one who could ever remember to call it.

“I dibs f-f-front muh-middle, then,” Bill said. The backseat was always the worst. You had a fifty percent chance of getting stuck in the middle and, if you weren’t, you were squished up to one of the windows.

“Wait, me and Stanley biked,” Richie said, realizing his bike was still leaning against a tree in front of the arcade.

“I always tell you to lock it up, Rich,” Stanley said. He was waiting to get in last, preferring to only sit next to one person. Unfortunately for him, Ben and Beverly had gotten in on the other side, meaning his seat partner was none other than his enemy as of fourth period today: Eddie.

“I’m not carrying around that fucking oversized horseshoe you call a bike lock,” Richie retorted.

“Don’t cry to me when your bike gets stolen, then.”

“If that ever happens, it’s a good thing I know the code for *your* bike lock.”

Mike started up the car and the radio started blasting through the speakers. He turned it down, but Richie wanted to turn it back up.

“Richie...” Mike groaned as he pulled away from the curb. The voices of TLC—and Richie—were now filling the car.

*“Hanging out the passenger side of his best friend’s ride, trying to holler at me,”* Richie sang in a voice that was better suited to impressions that didn’t need to be in key.

“Ugh, I hate this song,” Eddie said. Having to listen to Richie butcher it only added to the suffering.

*“I don’t want no scrub, a scrub is a guy that can’t get no love from me,”* Bev came in next, making a point to put her face right up to his ear. Eddie covered them both with the palms of his hands.

*“Hanging out the passenger side of his best friend’s ride,”* all of the Losers had joined now, even Mike, who was against the music, to begin with, and Stanley who would only save his voice for special occasions, like annoying the hell out of Eddie.

“Do you guys even realize how dangerous this is? You’re distracting Mike. He could easily swerve and hit a tree, or kill us all in an accident with another car!”

“Chill out, man!” Beverly said. “It may be shocking to hear, but you’re allowed to have fun sometimes.”

“He doesn’t even know what the word “chill” means,” Richie barked from the front.

“I’d rather be alive, thanks,” Eddie said bitterly. He folded his arms tightly together. Something told him that how hard Stanley’s elbow was digging into him wasn’t an accident.

“You’re alive, but are you ever really living?” Mike mused, watching him in the rear-view mirror. He must’ve meant it as a joke because both Richie and Bill laughed, but Eddie wasn’t finding the same humour in it. It was more like the feeling when you get handed back a test you thought you slid through with a solid B and it turns out you got a D minus. It wasn’t a total fail, but it was as close as you could get to it. Days like today made Eddie feel like he was getting a D minus in life.

Every time The Losers went out for pizza, their order was the same. One extra large, half pepperoni and mushroom and half sausage and olives. Eddie refused to eat anything other than plain cheese, so he always picked the toppings off of his slice. Richie had no problem taking what he wouldn’t eat. It wasn’t like he could let perfectly good toppings go to waste.

The seven of them piled themselves in the circular booth in the corner of the pizza place. If it was ever full when they showed up, they had to squish into one of the four-person ones with Bill, typically, pulling a chair up to the end. Cokes were served all around and Eddie wondered how much sugar Richie actually consumed in a day. This would be his third and Eddie knew that he’d put three sugars in his coffee in the morning, too. Richie’s diet had to consist of nothing more than caffeine and sugar. At least he quit his smoking habit pretty quickly after Beverly got him into it last year. Eddie knew Richie was only doing it because he thought it made him look cool, and because of that, he refused to be around them any time either of them decided to light up. Beverly was more discreet now, and Richie stopped buying cigarettes off the stoners. He never said



why.

Sophomore year seemed to be when life went backwards for all of the Losers. Bill was in a hectic on-and-off relationship with a girl whose name none of them dared repeat in his vicinity anymore. Thankfully, 'off' remained their permanent status. Stanley had gone through a brief rebellious stage that involved an explosive fight with his father and moving in with Richie for a week until his parents could bargain with him about coming home. It had something to do with feeling like his life was being controlled by his parents and ended with them grounding him for a month, anyway. This was at the same time Beverly had gotten into her punk rock phase that included the black nail polish but no spiky mohawks or chains on her jeans just yet. Eddie didn't even want to know the details when she came to school bragging about what happened in a mosh pit that weekend. Mike had spent the year in a state of mild depression after his beloved freshman girlfriend moved away over the summer. They tried long-distance for a month before Mike got the heartbreaking call that she found someone else. At least he had a good friend like Bill by his side who assured him that any girl at Derry High School would be lucky to have him. Their respective breakups gave them a chance to bond over the heartache, and start spending way too much time at the arcade.

It seemed like Ben and Eddie were the only ones who hadn't gone through something life-changing during their sophomore year. Well, if you could call picking up a smoking habit life-changing. Richie didn't exactly have anything else going on in his life, at least not that Eddie knew of. Ben, of course, was a lovesick puppy who wrote poetry in the library during his free time, but he was always like that. For Eddie, it turned out that junior year would be his time for all that teenage angst to catch up to him. For him to decide that authority was stupid and no one really cared about him even though he knew that wasn't true, and for an outburst every time someone said something that he took the wrong way. His brain was starting to work against him.

*Fuck hormones*, Eddie thought to himself. *Fuck 'em!*

"Why do w-we always o-order o-olives if Ben's the only wuh-one who e-e-eats them?" Bill asked as he picked the olives off his slice one by

one. He wouldn't take the pepperoni and mushroom one since he didn't like mushrooms, either. The taste always lingered.

"I like olives," Beverly said, reaching her hand towards Bill's plate and stealing one from the pile he had made for the garbage. "You have good taste, new kid." She winked at Ben.

"Gross," Eddie said even though no one had asked for his opinion.

Stanley didn't miss a beat. "You have the pallet of a two-year-old," he said before taking a bite of his food.

"The brain of one, too," Richie quipped, raising his hand to high-five Stanley. For a second it looked like Stanley wanted to, but he just shook his head, leaving Richie hanging before he gave up, as usual.

"Fuck you guys," Eddie said. He wasn't talking about the pizza, anyway.

The alarm on Eddie's watch beeped and he glanced at it briefly, already knowing it meant that it was seven-thirty. He was supposed to be home by eight to take his medication. His mom would be expecting him.

"Curfew already?" Mike looked at him, chewing on a bite of crust.

"Wow, I can't believe Mrs. K gave him an extra hour this year," Richie said, making the table laugh.

"For your information, I choose to be home at eight," Eddie defended.

Richie crossed his arms, giving him a distinct eyebrow raise from across the table. "Is that so? Does that mean you're going home right now, then?"

"No," Eddie huffed, dropping the rest of his pizza slice on his plate. "Get out of my way," he said to Ben so he'd let him out of the booth.

"You could say please," Ben told him as he stood up.

"Please get out of my way." His tone didn't change the second time

around.

“W-Where are you g-going?” Bill asked.

“To piss in peace!” Eddie yelled back without turning around. He was headed towards the bathroom and didn’t care who gave him a funny look on his way there.

From experience, Eddie knew to use the stalls instead of the urinal, no matter what. He didn’t want to stand anywhere near what could be possible splashback. When he left to wash his hands, flushing the toilet with his foot just to be safe, he tried to splash some cold water on his face from the sink. *What’s the matter with you?* he thought to himself. *You’re sabotaging yourself by letting everything get to you! Take Bev’s advice and chill out for once!*

The door opened to the bathroom just as Eddie was drying his face with a paper towel. He looked up, surprised to see who joined him.

“I think we need to talk,” Stanley said.

Eddie looked him up and down. He wasn’t sure he liked the idea of a bathroom confrontation, but this was Stan. “What do we need to talk about?”

“What happened at school today. You embarrassed me and got me in trouble.”

“Sorry to ruin your perfect record, Stanley, but it wasn’t just my fault,” Eddie told him. Stan was leaning against the sink counter, but Eddie didn’t know what could be lurking in the splashes of water around it so he just stood in the center of the room.

Stan almost looked hurt. “How was it my fault? You passed me the note in the first place! Can’t you ever take responsibility for all the stupid stuff you do?”

“I’m not the one who was drawing vulgar pictures in the middle of class.”

“It wasn’t a dick! Why would I draw a dick?!”

Eddie took a deep, frustrated breath. He hated fighting with Stanley, especially over something this ridiculous. They were supposed to be best friends, but sometimes the two of them could be wound a little too tight, making them a little too stubborn. Whenever they used to have arguments like this, Bill would always tell them it's because they're too alike. "You've always been the same deep down, Eddie. That's what makes you so close." Eddie would beg to differ. Sometimes he wondered if he and Stanley had anything in common at all.

"Alright, fine. I'm sorry," Eddie finally gave in. "Is that what you wanted to hear? Can we stop being so mad at each other?"

He never was good at apologies.

Stan kept staring at him, his arms crossed over his chest and his mouth edging close to a frown. "You don't care how you make other people feel, do you, Eddie?"

Eddie stood up straight, his eyebrows arching. No one had ever said something like that to him before. Not that he was a big fan of discussing feelings, but he knew Stanley had a lot of them. "Stan, I care about how you feel," he said, a soft tone to his voice.

Stanley turned towards the door, shaking his head. "Call me when you're interested in being a real friend."

"I— Stan, wait!"

The door shut in Eddie's face before he reached it. He yanked it open again, using his sleeve to cover his hand, but Stan was already halfway across the restaurant. He didn't yell at risk of making a scene, but he really didn't want him to leave. Even though it didn't sound like it, Eddie's apology was sincere. He watched Stan through the window as he walked back to the booth. His head was down and his hands were stuffed into his pockets to bear the autumn breeze. Stan didn't live too far from here, so he was likely calling it a night.

"What the fuck happened in there?" Richie asked as Eddie slid back into the booth. Ben just moved over instead of letting him in.

“Is S-Stan c-c-coming back?” Bill asked.

“I tried to apologize for the detention thing. He’s being weird, I don’t know. I hate fighting with him,” Eddie sighed.

“Aw, Eds.” Beverly reached behind Ben to rub Eddie’s shoulder. Even with all those punk rock attitudes, she was still the same sweet and caring Beverly.

“He’ll come around, man. Don’t worry,” Mike told him.

“There’s no way he could stay mad for that long,” Ben added.

Eddie smiled for what felt like the first time today. “Thanks, guys,” he said, but part of him felt like Stanley should be the one getting encouragement from their friends. He was the one who was really upset, after all.

“And if you don’t make-up, we’ll see you on Wednesdays and every other weekend,” Richie said.

Beverly glared at him from across the table. “Beep beep, Richie.”

“What? It’s not like they don’t argue all the time. They’ll be best pals by tomorrow, right Eds?”

“Go p-pay the buh-bill, Richie,” Bill told him, practically pushing him out of the booth.

“Why me?”

“Because we’re tired of hearing you speak,” Ben said, rather boldly. Richie raised his eyebrows at him.

“No one is going to protest this?” He looked around the table once he was on his feet. “Not even chip in five bucks?”

A few of them shook their heads before turning their attention back to Eddie.

“Fine. Guess we’re all still sucking Big Bill’s dick, huh?” Richie mumbled to himself as he walked off to the till.

That was the cue for all of them to leave. Any fight typically meant it was a good time to disperse. Besides, tomorrow was Saturday. Once Bill and Ben got off work at the Stop 'n' Pump—Ben worked at the counter inside while Bill pumped gas, naturally—they had plans to go bowling. It was Mike's idea, and he was the one with the car.

"I'm going over t-t-to Stan's," Bill told the group as he pulled his jacket on. "Gonna ma-ma-make sure he's o-oh-kay."

"Tell him I'll call tomorrow," Eddie said.

"Sh-Sure thing, Eddie," Bill nodded, then left with a wave.

"Guess that just leaves the five of us," Beverly said. "Should we go get baked?"

She was kidding, of course, but she happened to say it just as Richie came back, tucking away the receipt he'd surely be using to get out of paying for any group meals for the next month. "I'm down for getting baked," he said.

"Yeah? Where are you gonna get pot from, Rich?" Beverly laughed.

"I have only the best for you, sweetums," he mocked, throwing an arm around her as they filed out the door. Eddie rolled his eyes behind them. He had just about enough of this. Ben looked like he was thinking the same thing, but for a completely different reason. Obviously.

"Hey, guys, I think I'm just going to walk home," Eddie said, letting them get a few steps ahead.

Mike already had the keys out for his car. "You sure?" he asked.

"Yeah," Eddie nodded. "I'll see you guys tomorrow." He zipped his jacket as high as it would go as he started down the sidewalk.

"Give your mom a kiss goodnight for me!" Richie called after him.

Eddie didn't turn around, but he did stick up a middle finger above his head just for Richie.

Normally, Eddie wouldn't take it upon himself to walk alone at night. He didn't *think* anything was going to happen, necessarily. It just so happened that "Just in case," was his motto. But tonight he didn't care about what *could* happen if he were to walk around Derry just after sunset. He just wanted to be totally alone. No friends to tease him, no mom to nag him. Just completely alone with his thoughts.

Home was the last place Eddie wanted to go. If his mom hadn't gotten a phone call from the school letting her know about his detention, he would have to tell her just so she could sign his pink slip. Since he'd never gotten detention before, Eddie wasn't sure how she would react to the news. Rarely was his mom ever angry, but she knew how to guilt-trip him like no other. He'd be smothered with questions of whether he was alright and if there was something going on at school that he wasn't telling her. Honestly, Eddie didn't know what was wrong. He just knew that he felt wrong and angry and that it must've just been a side effect of being a teenager.

The sun hadn't quite set on Derry yet, but it was getting close. A familiar golden hue had blanketed the town, shining its reflection in every window and hiding behind every leaf that fluttered in the breeze. Eddie never liked fall. It was the season of allergies and cold weather and the sun setting far too soon in the day. Summer was always his favourite. His summers were always filled with memories that were now kept as polaroids in a shoebox he kept under his bed.

His favourite summer was 1991. It was the months just before The Losers had to endure their hellish sophomore year. The days were still filled with pedal bikes and melting ice cream cones and long hours in the clubhouse, wasting a day with magazines and card games and poorly recorded mixtapes. Back when they used to go to the baseball diamond on Saturdays and play kickball, all seven of them. Eddie always wanted to be on Mike's team and hated whenever he was stuck with Richie. Being on Richie's team meant you were sure to lose. More of his energy went into trash-talking than actually playing the game. And somehow he still had the second-highest score on *Street Fighter*.

One memory always stood out above the rest. A few of them had decided to go out to the quarry for a swim. Bill, Stanley, Richie, Eddie. They didn't realize it until later, but it was the first time the

four of them could remember hanging out alone since they met Mike, Beverly, and Ben. Bill had taken the first leap off the cliff, pulling his legs into a cannonball to make sure he'd make the biggest splash. Stanley jumped next, plugging his nose the whole way down because he was never good at holding his breath underwater. Then it came to Eddie and Richie, but Eddie had completely frozen up.

"You've done this a hundred times," Richie said. They were standing there in just their underwear and it felt different than when they did this at thirteen.

"I know. I know," Eddie said, closing his eyes tight in frustration. "Just give me a sec, okay?"

"My balls are shriveling up as we speak," Richie told him. They didn't exactly pick the warmest day to go swimming in freezing water.

"You can jump whenever you want. I'm not stopping you."

"Yeah, but if I jump first then you won't jump at all."

He didn't say it, but Eddie knew Richie was right. If he had no one up here convincing him to do it, he'd be spending the rest of the afternoon alone at the top of this cliff. He wouldn't put it past Richie to push him, though, so he didn't get too close to the edge.

Richie noticed how heavy Eddie was breathing; in through his nose and out through his pursed mouth. He was trying to calm down but he always ended up psyching himself out even more.

"Let's jump together," Richie said. "I'll count to three and then we run."

Eddie peeked at the water where he could see Bill and Stanley waving their arms and calling for them to come down. He took in a sharp breath again, relaxing his shoulders. "Okay," he said. "Let's jump together."

They stood back, giving themselves room to run. Eddie prepared his stance.

"One."



The rough, rocky ground was digging into their bare feet. Richie looked at him and Eddie nodded that he was ready.

“Two.”

Eddie held his gaze for a moment, and Richie smiled. Not often were his smiles more sincere than they were mischievous. It made Eddie smile back.

“Three!”

As they began to run, Richie grabbed onto Eddie’s hand. Once they were in the air, the rushing feeling of falling hitting their stomachs, Eddie squeezed it tighter. They didn’t let go all the way down.

Eddie didn’t have a photo from that day, but the image in his mind was clear enough. It was the kind of memory he thought about often but felt guilty every time he did. It meant nothing until he found himself in the cafeteria with all his friends on the first day of sophomore year, Richie sitting across from him. Eddie couldn’t stop staring at Richie’s hands. It wasn’t a lingering kind of stare, where the sounds of the room were merely background noise and every movement had fallen into slow motion. It was stolen glances and faint memories of how Eddie’s fingers felt wrapped around them. Richie didn’t seem like the kind of guy to have such soft hands.

Eddie soon found himself back at the arcade, wondering if he should go inside and waste a few tokens. He actually did want to play *Space Invaders* today, but it wasn’t the same by himself. Through the window, he could see that another movie had just been let out and kids were running to the machines, parents trying to usher them out the door. He realized he should probably call his mom, who’d be expecting him home in about—he glanced at his watch—two minutes. Eddie reached into his pocket. He had just enough change for two phone calls and there was a payphone a block over.

With the phone held close to his ear, not quite touching it, Eddie leaned back on the privacy shield as he waited through the rings. It took three before the line connected.

“Hello?”

“Bill, hey. I’m surprised you answered.”

“My puh-parents went out for dinner a-and I just got back from S-Stan’s. He didn’t feel like tah-talking, much.”

“What *did* he tell you?” Eddie asked. He wondered how deep this fight was going to go. It took a lot to divide the Losers, and he hoped a stupid note and detention wouldn’t lead to that.

“N-Nothing. He said he was j-just having a buh-bad day.”

*Same here*, Eddie thought.

“Hey, um, is it alright if I stay the night at your house tonight? I just — I really don’t want to go home right now. I know my mom is there and she’d already going to freak out that I’m coming home late and then I have to tell her about the detention so she’ll sign my slip and I —”

“Of, c-course, Eddie. Come over whene-ever you want.”

Eddie smiled to himself in relief. “Thanks, Bill. I’ll see you in a bit.”

He knew Bill wasn’t going to go the whole night without begging for answers about what happened with Stanley. That was alright, Eddie decided. He’d been telling Bill everything for as long as he could remember. His mind hadn’t cleared yet, though, and he still had a little time before the sun went down. Maybe he’d take the long way to Bill’s house.

But Eddie had one more phone call to make. He slid in the rest of his coins and waited to hear his mother’s shrill voice of concern on the other end.

“Oh, Eddie, where are you? I’ve been so worried!”

Eddie took another look at his watch. It was only four minutes past eight.

“I’m fine, Ma. I just wanted to let you know that I’m going to stay at Bill’s house tonight.”

“Honey, you can’t go to Bill’s without taking your medicine. Sickneses don’t go away on their own, you know. Plus you’ll need a toothbrush and mouthwash and deodorant. Do you even have an extra pair of undies with you? I know you don’t have pajamas—”

“Ma,” Eddie said, trying to stop her before she went on any longer. “I have back-up medication in my bag. I can just borrow pajamas and mouthwash from Bill. I’ll be alright for one night.” He actually wasn’t sure he *would* be alright for the night, but he needed to convince himself so.

“Oh, Eddie, sweetie, I don’t know about this. I wanted to talk to you about something when you get home, anyway. Mrs. Shirley called this afternoon and wanted to know if everything was alright with you. She said you seemed a little off today. I’ll take your temperature first before I make a call to Doctor...”

Eddie took in a sharp breath. As much as he adored Mrs. Shirley, he really wished she wouldn’t be so goddamn nosy. He understood that her concern came from a place of love, but it was also hardcore fucking up his plans right now.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Ma,” Eddie said into the receiver.

“Eddie, wait, I—”

“Bye! Love you!” he told her. Then, for the first time in his life, Eddie hung up on his mother.

Eddie wished he could be the kind of kid who could just tell his mom he wasn’t coming home and she wouldn’t try to start a mass panic. Two years ago, she actually called the police because he didn’t come home from school. He was just working on a project and lost track of time, but he didn’t call to let her know. Maybe this time she wouldn’t worry so much because at least she knew where he’d be. He could probably expect a phone call for him at Bill’s house later.

It would be a short walk to Bill’s, maybe ten minutes if he took a casual stroll. But as Eddie passed the arcade again, the colourful flashing lights of the machines reflecting in his eyes, he noticed Richie and Stanley’s bikes next to the tree in front of it.

Stanley's bike was locked to a light pole next to the tree, the combination all mixed up from the correct three numbers. Eddie had tugged on it to see if it unlocked, just in case. His bike was more stable than Richie's, after all. It was strange that Stanley hadn't been back for his bike yet, but Eddie supposed he could come back to get it in the morning. The two of them seemed to be having equally bad days, so not wanting to leave his house again was understandable. Eddie was dealing with the exact opposite dilemma right now.

Instead, he picked up Richie's bike by the handlebars, hearing them creak as he twisted them straight. The seat was a little high, so Eddie tried to adjust it before he got on.

It had been years since the Losers had all biked together. At first, it was just because high school made them so busy that getting all seven of them together was harder and harder. Then they started getting licenses and Mike and Bill got cars. Stan, Richie, and Eddie were still the only ones without a license. Stan had a learner's permit and Richie had already failed his road test twice, but Eddie hadn't even gotten that far.

As he got older, Eddie realized he had less need to bike. Mike or Bill always picked him up for school, Bill sometimes borrowing his mother's car for the day. Anywhere he needed to go alone tended to be walking distance, anyway, and having to deal with a bike was such a hassle. Not to mention the PSAs he'd see all the time about wearing a helmet. But tonight, as he peddled through Derry in the early dusk, the town being handed over to bar patrons and teens breaking curfew, Eddie held on tight with both hands and his backpack on his shoulders because he wasn't wearing a helmet.

Eddie didn't have a destination in mind, at first, but as he reached the end of Center Street, he decided to turn down Pasture Road. He rode until he reached the Kissing Bridge so he could cross the canal. He always hated the Kissing Bridge. It had a dumb name with a dumb purpose and people went there to do dumb things. But every time he crossed it, which wasn't often if he could help it, Eddie looked at the carvings on either side of railings. Sometimes he wondered who the initials belonged to, and maybe if he knew any of them. He never bothered stopping to check, but he had considered it.

Instead, Eddie decided to head for the Barrens.

Richie was so glad Stanley wasn't here to say "I told you so!" He would, too. Stan would never admit it, but he loved being right. Sometimes Stan wished he wasn't right when it came to how much that kid worried, but he was smart. That was why his bike was still locked to the post outside the arcade, and why Richie's was no longer leaning against the tree where he left it.

Derry wasn't too big of a town. To have your bike stolen meant you'd probably see some kid riding around on it sooner or later. So Richie decided to begin his search of the front yards of every house in this stupid town. He'd keep his eyes peeled for every bike he came across, with a rider or not. He was ready to put his trashmouth to good use to get that bike back. It had been his bike since he was thirteen, after all. Sure, it was a little too small and the chain was getting rusty, but that was his bike, dammit. He loved it almost as much as Bill loved Silver, even though he upgraded that old thing to his immobile car.

Richie stuffed his hands into the pockets of his jacket, pulling it tight around his waist as he walked down the sidewalk. His efforts were probably pointless, and he knew that. It was getting dark and every bike was starting to look the same. Not to mention how long it would take to cover the whole town thoroughly enough to find it. He wasn't giving up just as quickly as he started, but he'd have better luck if he looked tomorrow. Instead, he took this brief scan of the neighbourhood as a quiet stroll just for himself. It was Friday night and Richie really didn't feel like going home. What was he going to do there, anyway? Practice the electric guitar he bought without an amp and never learned to play? Lay in his bed listening to the same four albums he always listened to? They were good albums, he supposed. One of them was a tape of *Nevermind* that Beverly gave him for his last birthday. She had written on it "Warning: May make you fall in love with Kurt Cobain," which made Richie laugh when he opened it. The warning ended up being pretty valid.

It was strange how quickly he and Bev had become best friends once high school began. They had music and cynicism and an off-kilter sense of humour to bond over. They both hated the world as much as

they loved it, and would spend all night talking about what should change without ever doing anything about it. How close they were was never an act, even though all their jokes about making out and “my girl” definitely were. Richie never felt like that about Beverly, and about a year after their one and only date, they had discussed at length that it was mutual.

Beverly was the only person Richie ever came out to. Some days he wished he didn’t just because he didn’t want to think about what any of it meant. The day he told her, the two of them were walking back from lunch while debating whether they should skip the rest of the afternoon. Richie hated Biology more than any of his other classes, and Bev didn’t feel the need to go to English. So they sat under the bleachers where the stoners typically hung about and they shared a cigarette and talked about life. Bev wanted to know why she never saw Richie going after any of the girls and the words just slipped out of his mouth.

“If I was into girls, don’t you think I would’ve put the moves on you by now?”

She didn’t think it was as funny as he did. She didn’t say anything, at first.

“Bev, I think I’m gay. I don’t want to talk about it, though, okay? It doesn’t even matter.”

That gave her something to say. “It matters, Rich. It’s not a bad thing. How you feel matters.”

Sometimes Richie wished he didn’t have to deal with feelings. Contrary to what his friends may think, he had a lot of them. Too many. And there were still some things that Beverly didn’t know.

They didn’t talk about it for very long. Most of the time, he was glad she knew he was gay. It didn’t feel so much like a secret he was trying to hide. It was just a part of himself that he was slowly letting out.

Before he knew it, Richie found himself on Kansas Street. It was the opposite side of Derry from his house, so he wondered if getting Mike

to drop him off so he could bike home was a bad idea. His bike wouldn't be any less stolen in the morning. When Richie was alone like this, there was only one place he ever went. Well, also the arcade, so maybe there were two. Finding the right path through the bushes and trees, Richie ducked in.

When they were thirteen, the Losers were at the clubhouse almost more than their own homes. It was where they went nearly every day after school and where they spent their summers and weekends. The clubhouse was an escape to their own little world. One where being a Loser was the best thing you could be. As they grew up, they started coming less and less. Ben always made sure to check on it at least once a week, and Richie knew Beverly still stopped by when she could, but the others had so much going on that a meeting of the Losers Club in the Barrens was rare. At least Richie knew he'd be alone when he showed up.

Well, he thought so, until he saw his bike lying twisted on the ground right in front of the entrance. He ran towards it and yanked it up by the handlebars. The tires were still attached, and same with the chain, so at least no one had tried to steal parts off of it. There were no scratches and nothing out of the ordinary about it at all. What was out of the ordinary was the fact that Richie could see the lights inside the clubhouse had been turned on, glowing under the planks of the hatch. He heard something fall, then a mumbled: "Ah, fuck!" Richie dropped his bike to go investigate.

It was hard to be subtle when lifting the hatch of the clubhouse. Actually, it was impossible. As soon as Richie pulled the rope, he heard a scream from below. Now he knew exactly who was down here.

"Jesus Christ, Richie, you scared the shit out of me!" he heard Eddie say as he climbed backwards down the ladder. Richie skipped the bottom two steps and hopped to the ground.

"That's not exactly a challenge, Mr. Bike Thief."

Eddie was in the midst of pulling himself out of the hammock, trying to recover what was left from the can of orange soda he spilled on the ground. "What are you talking about? I didn't steal anything."

“How else would my bike get here, then, genius?”

“Help me clean this up,” Eddie said, searching the clubhouse for anything resembling a cloth or paper towel. No one had ever thought to stock the place with cleaning supplies.

“You’re going to clean spilled pop off a floor covered in dirt and leaves?”

“It gets sticky if you just leave it!”

“Why’d you take my bike? Your legs stop working or something?”

Eddie finally found an old dried out newspaper and decided that was good enough. He bent down and laid the pieces flat, hoping they could absorb most of the mess. “I don’t know, Rich, I just saw it there and hopped on. I knew it was your bike. It wasn’t like I was planning on keeping it. I would’ve taken Stan’s, but his actually has a lock.”

“And he would’ve killed you,” Richie added. No one besides Stan was allowed to ride on Stan’s bike. Eddie didn’t reply as he cleaned, Richie watching him from above. Something was wrong, Richie thought. He could tell almost instantly. “What are you doing here, anyway?” he asked. “You know it’s getting dark out? Aren’t you scared of the wolves and coyotes? Or is it just that squirrels and bunny rabbits that get to you?”

“Shut up, Richie,” Eddie grumbled. He decided it was best to just leave the newspaper where it was until it dried. That way it would be easier to throw it out all at once later.

“Really, man, why are you here? I don’t think I’ve ever seen you come out to the clubhouse alone.”

“To get some peace,” Eddie said, then turned to look at Richie pointedly.

Richie strolled casually around the room, checking out the state they last left it in. Usually, there were more pop cans and empty chip bags hanging around, but Ben must’ve gotten the chance to tidy the place up. Magazines and comics were always scattered in stacks, mixed up by type and genre. Richie had two favourites: As a kid, it was pretty



much anything that involved a superhero, and now he and Bev tended to share copies of *Alternative Press*. It was one of the few magazines he'd bother to actually read rather than just staring at the pictures. A few of them were sitting in his room back home. He picked up a *Hulk* comic off the top of the pile next to a wooden crate and flipped through it fondly, remembering what it was like when he could spend his afternoons doing just this.

"You planning on staying a while?" Eddie asked, sliding back into the hammock. Richie noticed he was holding a magazine of his own, but he couldn't see the cover.

"So what if I was?" Riche said. He dropped the comic back on its stack and continued looking around. It seemed as though Ben had done a little reorganizing. Most of their old toys had been removed or replaced with cassette players and a portable TV that Bill found in his dad's garage. Richie reached for the cassette player first. Naturally.

"I don't mind if you stay," Eddie decided. "Just don't be too loud or messy."

"When am I ever either of those things?" Richie claimed. Eddie shook his head, turning back to his magazine with a stifled laugh.

There was one thing that Richie knew for sure was down here. He knew because he was with Beverly when she bought it with her fake ID that actually worked, to both of their surprise. Richie opened a large crate on the far end of the clubhouse. It was the one they typically used to store snacks even though Mike had warned them not to store any food outside. Only one time did they ever get a few furry animals that came to visit during the day because of it. From the bottom, Richie pulled out a six-pack with two empty rings. Tucking it under his arm, he walked back to the hammock.

"Richie, what are you doing?!" Eddie exclaimed as Richie dropped himself into the opposite end of the hammock, letting it swing.

"Couldn't let you keep the best spot all to yourself."

Eddie groaned as he sat back, grumpily trying to make room for Richie and stop his foot from digging into his shoulder. Then he

noticed what Richie had in his hands.

“What are you planning to do with that?” Eddie asked with wide eyes of concern. He looked back and forth between the beer and Richie.

“Drink it,” Richie shrugged. “So are you.” He pulled out one of the cans and tossed it the short distance to Eddie. It landed on his stomach and Eddie flinched away as if it was contaminated.

“Are you crazy? We can’t drink beer!” Eddie exclaimed. The can had fallen next to his side and Eddie tried to turn it to take a look at the label. He didn’t recognize it, anyway. Not that he was planning on drinking a beer tonight. That was not his version of relaxation.

“It’s fine, they’re just Bev’s,” Richie shrugged. He hadn’t popped the can open yet.

“My concern was not *who* the beer belongs to. It’s still *alcohol*,” Eddie stressed. He moved his legs again, trying to shimmy away and give himself at least a bit of personal space. The hammock made it kind of impossible to be anything but squished completely together. The more Eddie squirmed, the closer they got.

“That’s the point,” Richie said, pulling the tab until he heard a crack.

“You can’t drink that, Richie!” Eddie said again.

“I can’t waste it, now. It’s gonna go flat if I don’t drink it.”

Richie took a long gulp from the can. His lanky hand looked too big around it. Eddie watched on in mild horror.

“You’ve never tried alcohol, have you, Eds?”

“Of course not. I’m sixteen.”

“I’ve been drinking since I was twelve,” Richie said proudly.

Eddie scoffed. “No, you haven’t. That wouldn’t impress me, anyway.”

Richie lifted an eyebrow, feeling his heart thud. “Why do you think I’m trying to impress you?”

Eddie's cheeks were getting so red he felt like he was on fire. He wished anything about the way he was sitting would stop Richie from looking at him. Glancing at the beer can next to him, he picked it up, feeling the carbonation slosh around within the aluminum.

"I've heard this stuff is gross," Eddie said, rocking the can back and forth. "Bill said he never drinks it at parties."

Richie snorted. "Parties? Did Mrs. Shirley start bringing beer to book club?"

"As if *you've* ever been to a party."

"What are you talking about? Bev and I throw parties together all the time."

Eddie tilted his head back in surprise. "You do?"

"Yeah, doesn't your mom pass along the invite when she comes home in the morning?"

"Shut up, Richie!" Eddie made a weak attempt to elbow Richie in the thigh, who just laughed.

Eddie looked at the beer can again. It was warm, but he assumed it was supposed to be cold when you drink it. The size was just as big as a can of Coke. What could this much alcohol do to him, anyway? Surely it wasn't enough to make him drunk. His mom never drank at home—and she'd have his head if she knew what was in his hand right now—so Eddie didn't exactly have anything to compare it to. He'd never even tasted alcohol, but he would admit his curiosity. This was what people did after a hard day, right? Come home from work, peak in the fridge, crack open a beer, and sit in front of the TV with their legs up. There was no TV or fridge here, but he did have a rough day.

He listened to the hiss of carbonation as he cracked open the can without a second thought. Richie's eyes widened.

"Eddie, if you don't want to—" Richie began, but Eddie had already tilted it up to take a sip.

Richie watched as Eddie's face instantly fell to disgust. Half of what was in his mouth ended up on his shirt, the other half choked on and spit on the ground next to him. "What the fuck is that?" Eddie said with his head hanging off one side of the hammock. He hacked out some more, hoping to get as much of the taste out as possible.

"You don't like it?" Richie asked. He sat up to make space for Eddie, and to stop the weight adjustment from making them tip over and land flat on their asses.

"That tastes like battery acid and vomit," Eddie said, voice shallow.

Richie laughed, leaning over to place his can on the ground next to the rest of the six-pack. Hopefully, Eddie wouldn't knock this one over, too. "You're not wrong," he said.

"If you don't like it, either, why do you drink it?"

Richie pouted his bottom lip and shrugged. "No one likes alcohol at sixteen. You drink because you know you aren't supposed to. Because... I don't know, you want to look cool? We say that's not the reason, but it is. You want to get drunk and forget your problems, or you just want to look cool."

Eddie didn't want to get drunk, but forgetting his problems sounded kind of nice. The way Richie abandoned his drink gave Eddie the impression that getting drunk wasn't his goal tonight, either.

"What kind of problems do you wish you could forget, Rich?" Eddie wondered. He had abandoned the magazine he was reading as well. It was Richie's September issue of *Alternative Press*. Music was never something he was really into, but he was curious.

"Shit, man," Richie said, tilting his head to the ceiling. "Doesn't everyone have a list of problems a mile long? It'd be nice to throw the whole thing away every once in a while. Just be in the moment and pretend everything that's going on in the world and in your life doesn't matter. Apathy sucks, but sometimes you look at a newspaper and envy the people that don't have to care."

"Why do you have to care?"

Richie smiled, but not with happiness or humour. He felt like he had a little inside joke with himself, but there was nothing funny about it at all. He could make a whole other list about a mile long.

“Everyone should care,” Richie decided to say. *Not everyone has to, but everyone should*, he continued in his head.

“Sometimes I think I care too much,” Eddie said. He could feel the hammock rocking and noticed in the corner of his eye that Richie was pushing them slowly against one of the pillars. “The way Stan worries so much, I get the same way. And not just about my asthma or how many sicknesses there are in the world. The big stuff like college and money and if I’m ever going to get married. It freaks me out.”

“You don’t have to worry about that kind of thing yet, Eds. You’re sixteen.”

“Yeah, but college applications are due this month. I don’t even know what I want to be.”

“Easy. You’re gonna be a world-renowned doctor, making millions and saving lives.”

Eddie snorted. “I do not have the grades for medical school.”

“And I’m gonna be in a famous band selling out arenas all over the world,” Richie continued, ignoring him. “Then neither of us will ever have to think of this shithole town again.”

“You don’t even play an instrument,” Eddie said. “And you definitely don’t sing, either.”

“I can *learn*. What else am I gonna do while everyone else is in college and I’m stuck here working Ben’s old job?”

“You’re not going to college?” Eddie sat up in concern. “Rich, that’s what you’re supposed to do after high school.”

“I’m not “supposed” to do anything. Who knows, maybe I’ll see what’s in California after I graduate. Can’t get much further from Derry than that.”

Eddie looked at him, watching the smile on his face as Richie got lost in his thoughts. Daydreaming of a life in California far away from here. Away from his friends and his “normal”. It was the first time Eddie ever really thought of a life outside of Derry. A life away from all of his best friends.

Eyes falling back to the ground, Eddie stood up slowly from the hammock, leaving Richie swinging alone.

“Where are you going?” Richie asked.

“You can’t just go to California,” Eddie said, shaking his head back and forth. Richie realized now that he was headed for the snack bin. Two Twinkies sat on top of the pile of junk food. Eddie took one for himself and tossed the other in Richie’s direction without warning. “That state is full of hippies and bums and out of work actors and you’ll end up just like one of them.”

“Oh yeah? You been there?” Richie questioned, a sarcastic snap in his tone.

“That’s what it’s known for!” He unwrapped the Twinkie and took an aggressive bite. Richie was amused more than anything.

“Where are you gonna go, Eds? Surely you won’t stay in Maine forever!” He smiled in the way he knew pissed Eddie off whenever he got riled up. It wasn’t too hard to piss him off.

Eddie sat down on one of the folding chairs that were probably covered in a layer of dust by now. He must not have noticed, otherwise, he’d be jumping to his feet as if a spider was crawling across his face.

“I always thought New York would be a cool place to live.”

“New York?!” Richie laughed. “You?!” He let out a more theatrical laugh this time. “The city that’s known for being disgusting? You wouldn’t survive a day there. Someone would tell you the rats carry the bubonic plague and you’d believe them.”

“I’m sure it’s not that bad!” Eddie said, even though Richie’s words were making his skin crawl.

Richie thought a moment, his head tilted to his shoulder. The Twinkie was still sitting in its wrapper on his chest. He flipped it over a few times just to give his hands something to do. "Lots of bands get their start in New York, too," he said, keeping his eyes distant.

Eddie stopped chewing to look up, averting his eyes just as quickly. The wooden pillars creaked as Richie stood from the hammock, dropping the Twinkie to the ground. Even though it was still in the wrapper, Eddie's brain instantly clocked it as contaminated now. He watched Richie as he walked towards the small table in the opposite corner that held a basket of tapes they had all left here. Some were albums, most of them mixtapes they had made on their own.

"For example, check this out." Richie filed through the tapes until he found Sonic Youth's album *Goo*. "Sonic Youth is one of the most iconic alt-rock bands of the eighties and they're New Yorkers through and through. This album had a ton of input from Kim Gordon. She was really hitting that third-wave feminism hard, and we got "Kool Thing" out of it. Plus, the guitar layering by Thurston Moore and Lee Ronaldo was sick. Definitely one of their best albums, if not *the* best."

Whenever Richie started talking music, Eddie's eyes tended to glaze over. He didn't know any of these people and he wasn't even sure he could pick out the guitar sound from a track. But he nodded along anyway, trying to make his eyes look interested because this was something Richie was passionate about, and he liked the way his smile lit up his face as he looked at the album cover he probably stared at a thousand times before. He was the kind of person to lay on his bed and close his eyes while he listened to music, absorbing every sound and lyric through his headphones. Eddie didn't even own a Walkman.

"What would you say your favourite album of all time is?" Eddie wondered, already aware that he wouldn't know a thing about whatever Richie gave as an answer.

"Shit, I don't know." Richie looked to the ceiling, taking a deep breath and blowing it out pursed lips. "That's an impossible question. I don't even know if I could tell you my favourite album from this year. There's just so much music out there, man. So much *good* music."

"I think this is a pretty good album," Eddie said, peering over Richie's shoulder as he reached his hand out. He plucked *ABBA's Greatest Hits* from the box. "Probably one of my favourites."

Richie gave him an unamused look, eyes half shut and mouth agape. Eddie wanted to laugh, but he decided to hold it in.

"Don't you ever say those words about this album again." Richie took it from his hand and instead of putting it back in the box, he tossed it over his shoulder. It smashed to the ground, the plastic snapping and spilling out the tape. Richie flinched when he heard it, but chose not to turn around and look at the damage.

"Why the fuck did you do that? That was Mike's!"

"I'm doing you both a favour," Richie informed him. "You need an education in *good* music."

"Okay, Mr. Music Snob, I think ABBA is good." Eddie walked back to the hammock and let himself collapse into it now that it was free again.

Richie shook his head. "Unacceptable," he said, his back still turned. Scooping up about six tapes under his arm, he pivoted on his heel. In his other hand, he had a Walkman that had Mike's name written on it and a singular pair of headphones hanging off his pinky finger. "Move over," Richie said, already squishing in next to him.

"There's no room!" Eddie protested, but Richie was already half on top of him. He tried to move over without rolling off, but Richie was nearly six feet tall and barely fit on the hammock alone.

"You know, you're the only one of us who has not contributed a mixtape," Richie said. He wasn't exactly cooperating with Eddie's wiggling to get comfortable.

"What would I put on a mixtape? 'Jingle Bells' and 'Dancing Queen'?"

Richie snorted as he finally decided on a tape. Looking at the side of the cover, Eddie could see that it was one Beverly had made and he had to resist rolling his eyes. Sliding it into the Walkman, Richie



lifted the headphones before he hit play.

"These must be Ben's. They're big enough to fit both of our heads," he said, stretching them to signal Eddie closer.

"Your head is definitely bigger than Ben's."

"I'll tell you what else I have that's bigger than Ben's."

Eddie was out of responses that involved anything more than a disgusted groan, so he just sighed instead.

Having to squeeze both their heads between the same pair of headphones meant they did have to get uncomfortably close. Richie didn't seem to mind, and Eddie didn't either, per se. He'd just be able to think a lot clearer if Richie's head wasn't currently pressed against his own.

"So, what is this?" Eddie asked, snatching the case from Richie's hand. His eyes scanned the tracklist Bev had made, covered in doodles of flowers and tiny skulls. That girl really was all about her image.

Richie grinned to himself. "That Sonic Youth song I was telling you about. Bev has great taste."

"Of course she does," Eddie mumbled to himself, and he would've got a reaction from Richie if it wasn't for the screeching electric guitar and screaming voice that just erupted in their ears. In a panic, Richie fumbled for the stop button. Or eject button. Anything that would stop the noise.

"Shit, Richie, turn it down!"

"I'm trying!"

Richie twisted the volume knob all the way off, then back up just slightly so they could hear what it was. The heavy vocals, deep bass, and quick drum beat could only be described as death metal, as Richie knew it. He was never a fan.

"*This* is what you listen to?" Eddie asked, tone full of judgment.

“No! Bev doesn’t listen to it either. Someone must’ve mixed up the tapes.”

He picked up another two tapes and slid them from their cases. Mike’s and Ben’s both had their own mixtapes inside, their names printed on the sticker so they wouldn’t get mixed up. The tape Richie put into the Walkman didn’t have a name.

“Which one of us would listen to screaming music?” Eddie asked as Richie went through the rest of the tapes. The last one just had a white cover, but when he slid it off, Bev’s tape was inside. They looked at each other, then back at the cover as Richie flipped it over. All that was written on the other side was “For Stanley Uris’ use ONLY.”

“Stan fucking Urin listens to death metal?” Richie exclaimed, stifling his laugh.

“Why would he want to listen to music that sounds so awful?” Eddie said, a disgusted look on his face.

“Some people like it to get their anger out,” Richie said. He thought about it a moment longer. “You know what? This makes perfect sense,” he decided, then took the tape out of the Walkman to put back into its rightful home.

While Richie was preoccupied with getting the tapes organized, Eddie picked up one that didn’t have a name on it. On the back was still a tracklist, though, and on the front nothing but a giant letter ‘E’.

As soon as he saw what Eddie was holding, Richie’s throat made an involuntary squeak right before he snatched the tape out of his hand. “That’s not supposed to be down here,” Richie said, feeling his face heat up. He was pretty sure he was on fire, actually. The flames were licking at his cheeks.

“Did you make that?” Eddie asked, looking concerned now.

“Yeah, but it’s an old one,” Richie said. He could date it to the summer before sophomore year, actually. To be even more specific, he seemed to remember making it while his hair faintly smelled like

the water from the canal, and he could still feel the fingernail marks from a nervous hand holding tight onto his.

“Let’s listen to it,” Eddie said, taking the Walkman from Richie’s grasp. His side of the headphones had fallen off his ear, so he fixed it while getting the new tape sorted. Richie watched on, deciding not to stop him. Something inside of him must have made him feel quite bold. Maybe it was the two whole sips of beer he had earlier.

Richie hoped Eddie wouldn’t listen too closely to the lyrics. Maybe they could just talk about the intricate strumming patterns of the guitar or how dynamic the rhythm sections were, even though he knew Eddie didn’t know what any of that meant. Or maybe they could just talk. About anything. About school, about life, about—

“What happened with you and Stan today, Eds?”

“It was so dumb,” Eddie sighed. To him, everything was dumb.

The first song on the mix was “Thirteen” by Big Star. Richie liked the first verse the best, but he tried not to think about it.

“We were in Mr. Simmons’s history class and you know how boring that class is, obviously. Bill sits in front of me, so usually, me and him will pass a game of hangman or tic-tac-toe back and forth just to make time go by faster. But Bill skipped History today, so I lost my game buddy. Ben sits right next to me, so I drew out a little tic-tac-toe board, took my turn and handed it over to him. He shook his head because, you know him, he doesn’t ever want to risk getting in trouble, so I tell him to hand it over to Stan one row over. He does it, then I see Stan open the paper, scribble something on it, then hand it back to me through Ben. I open it up and see he wrote: “ *This is why you have a C in History.* ” Can you believe that?”

“What a dick!” Richie said, even though he found it to be quite amusing, coming from Stan.

“That’s what I thought too! So I drew this picture of a dick with like hairy balls and googly eyes and shit, right? Made it real veiny and gross.” Eddie traced the drawing in the air above them. They weren’t looking at each other as they spoke, and half of their hearing was

distracted by Richie's sad soft rock collection.

"Disgusting. I love it," Richie said.

"Then I write his name and an arrow pointing towards the dick, then I hand it back to Ben. Another minute goes by and I see the paper drop on my desk again. Just as I'm opening it, Mr. Simmons walks by and smacks a fucking yardstick on my desk! A yardstick! Are teachers even allowed to do that anymore?"

Richie shrugged. "Probably not."

"He grabbed that note right from my hand. Claimed we were making crude drawings and gave all three of us detention. Stan said his drawing was supposed to be a hand giving a middle finger, but I thought it looked like a hot dog with eyes. Now he never wants to speak to me again because of it," Eddie finished. He didn't want to think about Stan being mad at him, but it was all his mind kept going back to. He felt terrible. Maybe even terrible enough to go over there in the morning and offer him an apology. Even though it was half Stan's fault.

"That's it?" Richie raised an eyebrow. "Stan won't talk to you because you got detention from the teacher who hands out detentions like they're free samples at a fucking ice cream shop?"

"He's never gotten detention before," Eddie explained. "I haven't either."

"Yeah, but you should've. Remember that time Mrs. Shirley didn't show up for study hall and they forgot to call a sub so everyone ditched? We even convinced Stan to come, and the three of us decided to hang out in the auditorium because Ben was in there alone painting sets for theatre class. When your aspirator ended up in the rafters, you and Stan stood guard while me and Ben climbed up there to get it."

"The only reason my aspirator was up there was because *you* thought it would be funny to drop-kick it," Eddie said sternly. He was still annoyed every time he thought about it. The bastard broke the plastic on it, too.

"I paid for a new one, didn't I?" Richie reminded him. "My point is, that was definitely detention worthy. Stan's just overreacting because he has a perfect record. Doesn't mean you tarnished his reputation. This was just the first time he got caught."

"We convinced him to do that, though."

"It didn't take much convincing. Stan wants to come out of his shell. It just scares him, is all."

Eddie still felt bad. Just because Richie could tell that was the case didn't mean Stan had the same forgiving mindset. He definitely wouldn't be thanking Eddie for bringing him out of his shell any time soon. At the same time, he couldn't be mad at him forever. Stan would come around. Maybe Eddie had to work a little harder on his apologies. What better time to practice than first thing tomorrow morning?

That was exactly what Eddie was going to do. As soon as he woke up tomorrow, he was going to go over to Stanley's house and make things right. He needed to prove to Stan that he cared about how he felt. A real apology, this time. Stan deserved that.

In the passing moment of silence, Eddie realized he quite liked the music playing in his ear. "What song is this?" he asked.

"Do You Wanna Know a Secret," Richie said.

Eddie hesitated, then rolled his head to the side so he was facing him. "Sure," he said.

"What?" Richie stared at him blankly. "No, the name of the song is "Do You Wanna Know a Secret" by The Beatles," Richie told him.

"Oh," Eddie said faintly. He looked away. "I thought you always said The Beatles were overrated."

"They are," Richie said. He left it at that. The faded conversation forced Eddie to listen again.

*Do you promise not to tell?*

*Let me whisper in your ear*

*Say the words you want to hear...*

Normally, Eddie wouldn't mind this. Being squished into this hammock with his best friend. A pair of headphones pulling them close together, the warm skin of Richie's cheek brushing against his. It wasn't supposed to feel weird. It wasn't supposed to make Eddie's heart flutter and his mind race and his words fall flat because he couldn't get out what he wanted to say. This was just Richie.

Just. Richie.

"Just" had always been a useless word. That wasn't how Eddie would describe him. He still couldn't quite make sense of the strange feeling in the pit of his stomach every time Richie stood too close. Why every joke and all the innocent teasing made him feel special in some way because Richie didn't tease the Bill or Stan this much, though it was a fair amount. Richie didn't jump from the cliffs over the canal holding Beverly's hand. Richie didn't share the hammock with Mike or Ben.

To Eddie, Richie was never *just* Richie.

"What does the 'E' stand for?" Eddie asked.

Richie lifted his head from where it was resting. "What 'E'?"

Eddie showed him the case again. It was written in red marker against the white cover, the lines of the letter thick and scribbled over a few times. With his thumb, Eddie traced the middle line. He didn't look at Richie because he didn't want to have to guess what he was thinking.

"It means 'Excellent Music'," Richie said.

Now Eddie had to look at him to make sure he was being serious. Richie was biting his lips together, refusing to make eye contact.

"Excellent Music?"

Richie nodded. "It is excellent. Wait until you listen to the whole thing."

“Why would you put The Beatles on an album called “Excellent Music” if you don’t even like The Beatles.”

“First of all, it’s a mixtape, not an album.”

“Same thing!”

“Second, I said they were overrated, not that I didn’t like them.”

“It doesn’t even make sense why you would put just an ‘E’ for it to mean “Excellent Music” like why not put “E.M.” or, I don’t know, come up with a better fucking name than—”

And then Eddie stopped because now Richie’s lips were on his and he didn’t know what to do.

It was only for a moment. Richie was watching him speak fast like he had a deadline to meet and it started to make him smile. Sort of in an amusing way, but also out of fondness. It was the kind of smile that triggered a joke that was already out of Richie’s mouth before he thought twice about it. Which might have been how his lips ended up on Eddie’s. He just leaned forward and did it. He didn’t think twice. Maybe he should have.

Richie pulled away fast.

“Did you just kiss me?” Eddie said, shock filling his voice.

“What?” Richie scoffed. “No!”

“Yes, you did!” Eddie said.

He was right, obviously, but Richie’s brain didn’t know what to do besides panic. His heart was thudding out of his chest. He needed to get out of this hammock. “Eds, I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

“Do it again.”

Richie met Eddie’s eyes again. His were confused, but Eddie’s weren’t.

“What?”

Without another word, Eddie leaned in and kissed him again. Softer, this time. Not so rushed, but still cautious. Richie lifted his hand to hold Eddie's cheek. Not to bring him closer, just to have it there, touching him in one more way. Eddie's hand found Richie's waist and let his fingers get bundled in the loose fabric of his t-shirt. The tapes had fallen between them quite uncomfortably. Richie was quick to scoop them up and get them out of the way. He didn't enjoy the sound of them tumbling to the ground, but he had to trust they were durable enough to survive the two-foot fall. His mind was too busy still trying to catch up to be able to care.

Eddie yanked the headphones off their heads because they were getting in the way too, but he nearly knocked Richie's glasses off his face in the process. Richie laughed against his lips.

Eddie had no idea what he was doing. He was just trying to figure it out in the moment, forcing himself to get lost in the movements and the rhythm. But there was no rhythm. Nothing familiar to fall back into. Eddie couldn't tell if it was sloppy or if this was just the way kisses were. It wasn't like he would know.

But he didn't care about that anymore. There was no one else Eddie would rather have as his first kiss. No one else would make him feel this comfortable, this safe, this happy. God, he felt like such a fucking sap. Richie would be teasing him for weeks if he knew what Eddie was thinking right now.

"I didn't think that would ever happen," Richie said when they finally pulled away, now laying on their sides, still close. "I didn't know you felt like that."

As his fingers traced Richie's shoulder down to his elbow Eddie thought of every moment a look alone had made his breath hitch. Sitting on the couch in Bill's basement with their legs overlapped, next to each other in the cafeteria with their arms resting against each other. How every touch felt like fire. How the image of Richie's smile was forever burned in the back of his mind. The sound of his laughter an earworm that would never go away.

It was always him.



“Wait, you *do* like me, don’t you?”

Eddie gave him a funny look. “Dude, I just *kissed* you. Are you really asking me that?”

“Yeah, but I kissed you first. I thought, maybe, that you just—”

With a short laugh, Eddie put his hand over Richie’s mouth. In any other situation, he was sure he would have it slapped away. “You’re so fucking stupid, Rich,” he said.

“Asshole,” Richie tried to say, but his voice was muffled by the palm holding his lips together.

“You know, I kind of like you like this,” Eddie said, purely to amuse himself before dropping his hand again.

“Who would’ve thought this trashmouth was so irresistible? You can’t seem to get enough of it,” Richie grinned.

With a humoured smile, Eddie tried to shove him. He meant it playfully, but the instability of the hammock almost sent Richie over the edge, limbs flailing and a face full of panic. Eddie grabbed his arm just in time, pulling him back in. They lost themselves in a fit of laughter, not even realizing how much they had tangled themselves together. When they stopped, Eddie realized he was still holding Richie’s hand.

“Hey, um,” Eddie began, licking his lips a little awkwardly. “Do you think that maybe sometime you’d want to go see a movie without Bev and the guys?”

Richie took in a sharp breath, the way you would if you were about to yawn. He was letting his thumb brush across Eddie’s knuckles. Eddie didn’t realize this would ever feel so easy. “I don’t know, Eds. Wouldn’t want to make Mrs. Shirley jealous.”

“I think she’ll live,” Eddie said. It wasn’t like him to play along with one of Richie’s overused jokes. He had to be in an especially good mood.

This was not how he thought his day was going to go.

“Yeah, okay,” Richie nodded with a smile. “Let’s go to a movie sometime.”

The mixtape had been long forgotten about by now. Richie would have to give Eddie his music education some other time. He hoped they would have more nights like this. Not even just the kissing part. It was being here with this boy he foolishly thought would never love him back.

Richie thought back to that afternoon at the bleachers when he revealed to Beverly his biggest secret. It was still the only time he ever said it out loud. He remembered Bev wrapping an arm around his torso and resting her head on his shoulder. She didn’t know what to say and he didn’t blame her because he completely threw her off guard. But she was there, and she reminded him that she loved him. That was all he needed to hear.

“Do you think Eddie knows?” he remembered asking her, the bitter aftertaste of the cigarette they just shared still on his tongue.

Beverly looked up at him curiously. The sunlight was casting lined shadows on her face from the bleacher seats above them. “Did you tell him?”

Richie shook his head. “I didn’t tell anyone.”

“Then I don’t think he’d know, Rich.”

“I wish he did,” Richie said, looking down at his hands. His glasses slid down his nose, so he pushed them back up. “It would be so much easier if he could just *tell*. ”

Bev smiled at him, not quite a look of pity. Maybe empathy, but she would never truly know what this was like. “Maybe you should talk to him, then.”

Richie was never that good with words. Not when he had to be serious, anyway. He liked his way of letting Eddie know even better.

“Shit!” Eddie suddenly exclaimed. He was looking at the watch on Richie’s wrist. “Is it really eleven o’clock?”

Richie looked down for himself. “Man, how long have we been laying here for?”

Eddie was already standing up, leaving Richie quite literally hanging there. He tried his best to tidy up the mess they made while he searched for where he left his jacket. “I told my mom I was sleeping over at Bill’s tonight. She probably called there a hundred times already.”

“Relax, Eds. You know Bill would cover for you, no question.”

“I still need to go. I told him I’d be there.”

Richie finally dragged himself off the hammock, as well. Half of his reasoning was the pain of watching Eddie put away the tapes with no method to his madness. Who knows what covers ended up with which tapes.

He really needed to have a little chat with Stan about his music taste...

“Are you going to finish this?” Eddie asked. He was holding up the beer Richie opened with the tips of his fingers. To Eddie, all alcohol was contaminated.

“Nah,” Richie said, even though it killed him to waste it. “Leave it for the raccoons. I’m sure they’ve just been waiting to party down here.”

As he watched Eddie clean, not doing much to help although he didn’t see much of a mess to begin with, Richie noticed the Twinkie he had discarded on the floor. He picked it up, intending to pocket it for later, but then he realized Eddie’s pink slip was sitting next to one of the pillars the hammock was tied to. At some point in the evening, it must’ve fallen out of his pocket. Richie picked it up and smoothed out the creases, his eyes landing on the parent signature line near the bottom.

“Have you showed this to your mom yet?” he wondered, holding it up between two fingers.

Eddie tried to snatch it from his hand, but Richie was quicker. “No,” Eddie said, not bothering to try twice. It wasn’t like he actually

wanted the slip, anyway. "I'm sure Mrs. Shirley will give her a call about it this weekend, though."

"Just in case she doesn't..." Richie said, taking it to the table made of wooden planks that Ben used for a desk. All his plans for the clubhouse were still in rolled-up tubes next to it. Richie took a pen from the cup and clicked it open. With careful hands, he wrote "Sonia Kaspbrak" on the line in almost-legible cursive.

"There." He handed it back to Eddie so he could take a look.

"That's not what my mom's signature looks like," he said.

"They'll never check."

Eddie looked at it again. It was actually pretty close if you shut one eye and held it back. Maybe he could just say she was a little under the weather when she signed it.

"Won't I get in trouble if I get caught?"

"As far as my mom knows, I've never gotten detention," Richie said. He had about five just from getting caught smoking in the bathroom, but his mom still never knew he used to have a habit. "On the off-chance you do get caught, I'll take the fall. Nothing they wouldn't expect, and I could probably talk them into nothing more than a slap on the wrist."

Eddie smiled at him as he put the slip away. It might've just been stupid enough to work. If not, Eddie didn't think he'd mind another hour of detention if he had some pleasant company, this time. "Thanks, Rich."

"Anytime. I mean it, too."

They climbed out the hatch of the clubhouse and closed it behind them. The hope was always that no furry creatures would get in, but they always did. Richie headed straight for his bike, picking it up from where Eddie had discarded it earlier. The kickstand was almost never used.

"I'll walk you to Bill's," Richie told him. It wasn't that far from his

own house, anyway.

“Okay,” Eddie agreed easily.

But the first few minutes were awkward. It was dark now and only some of the streetlights would actually turn on. They were both stealing glances from one another and Richie really wanted to say something. He kind of wanted to hold Eddie’s hand, but it took two arms to keep his bike up as he pushed it along the path. That’s what gave him the idea.

“Want to ride double?”

Eddie looked up at him with raised eyebrows. “You’re crazy if you think I’d ever get on the back of that thing.”

Maybe Richie was.

He stopped and hopped on his bike, planting both feet on the ground to hold it steady. Eddie walked a few steps further ahead, then turned around to look at him over his shoulder.

“C’mon, Eds,” Richie said, and his next words he meant sincerely. “I swear, I would never let anything bad happen to you.”

Eddie sighed in consideration, then took a step towards the bike with a nervous smile. Maybe he was a little crazy too.